

Interview with Vinita Turakhia of @gnlaccessories

This month we had the absolute pleasure of speaking with Hong Kong based Vinita who is owner of the company, GnL Accessories. GnL standing for Genuinely Not Leather! We got to know Vinita through Facebook when she put a shout out to vegan companies all over the world to chat with her on Instagram live. Of course, we responded, and we chatted via Instagram back in November.

So, when the time came to think about January's newsletter there was only one person we wanted to speak to (again) and it was of course Vinita.

She kindly agreed to answer our questions and provide an insight into life in Hong Kong.

Firstly, we wanted to know how long Vinita had been vegan for and what prompted that lifestyle change?

I have been vegan for three years. I remember breast feeding my new born baby and browsing through Facebook at the same time. I came cross videos which spoke about the dairy industry and how new born calves were forcefully separated from their mums so that we (humans) could have that milk! There I was making a choice to feed my child and I asked myself how could I ever take this basic right away from another living being? The contradiction was too stark and I knew immediately that I HAD to make a change.

I had been vegetarian but milk was a very important part of my diet- so the transition was a slow and gradual process especially because I was going to be raising two 'wee-gans". I read up on substitutes and nutritional deficiencies to ensure that my family and I met our nutritional requirements on a vegan diet. It took 6 months to



The wonderful Vinita

transition completely and here we are. 4 happy and perfectly healthy vegans 😊

How inspirational that you made that decision and took your time transitioning. We always say that choosing a vegan lifestyle is great but you must do your research. Especially where children are involved.

Moving on, we asked Vinita how long her company GnL Accessories has been trading?

I incorporated my company in March 2019. Hong Kong was in the midst of a social unrest at the time but I was confident things would change. I went ahead, quit my 9-5 and dedicated all my time to setting up GNL. I looked for manufacturing partners that followed ethical practices and had certifications to back up their claims. Balancing the production cost with ethical manufacturing practices is an art and I was proud of my manufacturing partners- a small workshop in Chiang Mai, Thailand and a small factory in China. Political uncertainties notwithstanding, the brand was ready to launch in early 2020 and then COVID hit the world. It was like having your wings clipped just when you were so eager to fly.

We can completely relate to sourcing manufacturing partners who share the same ethos. It is extremely important to work with, promote and encourage like minded businesses. A lot of companies share the same frustration with Covid-19 as it has stunted a lot of business. Especially the food and entertainment industry. We only purchased our van February 2020 and within less than a month we had a nationwide lockdown. This has meant a lot of companies such as ourselves have had to think of different ways of working, which means if we hadn't, we would have never met people like Vinita.

So, now we know when GnL Accessories started, we asked Vinita to delve further into the company and what inspired this career change?

When I moved to a vegan lifestyle, I did not just change my diet. I wanted to move to a cruelty-free more sustainable way of life. As I shopped for clothes and accessories, I realised that most vegan handbags and shoes were made from polyurethane (PU). PU is a great substitute to leather but it comes from crude oil which in itself is a finite resource.

I wanted to work with something that was relatively more natural and cost effective at the same time. It was around the time I was working as a policy lead on 'Modern Slavery' in my day job. I spoke to a lot of brands on ethical manufacturing practices and that is how the idea for started GnL was born. I wanted to create a brand that brought the worlds of 'cruelty-free', 'eco-friendly' and 'ethical manufacturing' together- without compromising on style or functionality.

Today, GnL offers handbags and accessories made from 'cork fabric' and 'teak leaf fabric'. Both fabrics we use are alternatives to leather but are unique in their own way with a carbon foot print of nearly 1/3rd of animal leather. GnL's products are not just for vegans. GnL's products are for anyone who wishes to consume consciously and reduce their carbon footprint.

Well said, ethical, vegan products are not just for vegans. With the current situation surrounding climate change people need to be more aware than ever as to how their lifestyles and choices are affecting the planet. That's why it's so great that people like Vinita are ensuring that these ethical options are available.

Now, we were super excited to speak to someone in Hong Kong. A place that we are hoping to visit in the future. So, we took this opportunity to find out more about this beautiful part of the world. We wanted to find out what living in Hong Kong is like for people following a vegan lifestyle?



Vinita at one of her favourite spots in Sai Kung Country park

Hong Kong is a beautiful place that offers a wonderful mix of old-world charm, new technology, high rises and natural beauty. You must visit Hong Kong as soon as you get the opportunity.

Vegan food is becoming increasingly popular in Hong Kong. I never found it hard to go vegan even when I started 3 years ago. Traditional Cantonese restaurants offering vegetarian food would generally be (accidentally) vegan. The restaurants I visited have always had very kind and patient staff who would prepare something off the menu for me to fit in my dietary needs.

It's always wonderful to hear about what veganism is like in other parts of the world and it's so awesome that Hong Kong is a place that seems to be embracing this

culture. Saying that we asked if Vinita has noticed an increase in popularity for veganism in Hong Kong, over the past twelve months?

Absolutely!! The number of vegan restaurants has increased, the number of plant-based groceries available at super markets has gone up. I feel like I am spoilt for choice. In the recent past, I have seen a number of locally manufactured vegan cheese brands and handcrafted vegan chocolate brands start-up as well. I am still not very happy with the price points but then I guess as competition increasing pricing will reduce and finally be at par with the non-vegan substitutes.

It's great that veganism is on the rise within Hong Kong. We completely agree, there has been a surge in veganism across the UK within the last three years. Over the past

twelve months that demand has become overwhelming. There are so many plant-based options in supermarkets and there has been an influx of vegan fast food to keep up with demand.

Maybe part of the reason for this spike in vegan popularity has been due to the current pandemic and people scrutinising their health closely. With reports circulating each day in regards to the benefits of a plant-based diet this could be one of the reasons why more people are opting for plant-based.

We asked Vinita what lockdown looked like for people in Hong Kong and how they have coped with this massive lifestyle change? *Hong Kong has never been in a 100% lockdown but there have been various social distancing measures that have been imposed by the government at various points in time. We are now in the middle of the 4th wave and schools and offices are closed. It is hard on everyone. In my family we have 6 people at home of which 4 need electronic devices to either work on or to complete home schooling. It is hard to make space in HK's particularly small homes.*

It has been hard for me to manage my business with home schooling my 2 children and maintaining my sanity. I catch up on some shows on Netflix (once my children go to bed), meet with friends (in small groups) and when all fails- it is a glass of (vegan) wine to the rescue!

There's nothing a glass of vegan red wine can't fix!! Now we get down to the nitty gritty and talk about food, yay!! As we are always looking for new inspiration for food and especially love Asian cuisine, we asked Vinita to share with us a particular food or dish that she loves?

Tofu, wood ear mushrooms, lotus root and Chinese greens are my favourites. These taste great when cooked in Chilli Oil. Have you tired cooking with Sichuan chili oil? It has a slightly numbing flavour

which might not go down well with many but it is my favourite. I recently discovered a 'vegan fish sauce' made from sea weed that adds a wonderful flavour to anything I cook.

Oh, my days, yes, we have cooked with Sichuan oil and it is divine. The other half of Soy Oi, Paul, absolutely loves spice so he likes the hotter the better! As for sea weed it is one of my favourite ingredients! It's salty flavour is one of our faves and it is packed with goodness! We have never ever tried wood ear mushrooms but I can tell you now we most definitely will be as soon as we can get our hands on some!

Obviously, this year people have been restricted as to where they can eat. In a 'normal' environment we wanted to know if there is anywhere in particular that Vinita likes to eat out? In the hope that one day we can try it too 😊

I love the local Cantonese restaurants in Hong Kong. Dim sums and dumplings are my favourite. There is a quaint little restaurant in the middle of Hong Kong Park called 'Lok Cha Tea House' which is beautiful. They would play traditional Cantonese music live on Sunday afternoons and I enjoyed my herbal tea with dim sums in this beautiful setting. They have since stopped the music but I enjoy the food there. I also like a local Sichuan restaurant called "Chilli Fagara". Their 'crispy spicy tofu with house blended spices' is my favourite. Pizza has also been favourite food and I am so glad that "Mayse Artisan Bakery" started making vegan sourdough pizza in Hong Kong 3 years ago. Their truffle pizza is a must have.



I can't control myself at the thought of a truffle sourdough pizza. I am actually salivating and Hong Kong has jumped right to top spot on my must visit list, for this pizza alone!

Now, as we mentioned previously, and is becoming custom in our features, we asked if Vinita had a favourite recipe, she would be willing to share with us! Extremely cheeky of us but as we said we just love Asian cooking and she was kind enough to share her Dan-Dan Noodles!

Now we have tried this recipe and can confirm it's a dream! The perfect blend of spice and flavour it was a definite hit with our family!

Thank you so much to Vinita for taking the time to answer our questions. It has been utterly thrilling learning about life in Hong Kong and the creation of GnL Accessories.

We highly recommend giving her Dan-Dan noodle recipe a try as we are sure you won't be disappointed. Please send us pictures of your noodles so we can share them on social media and with Vinita.

Make sure you follow her on Instagram @gnlaccessories they also ship worldwide 😊 Yay!!!

If you have any questions or queries about anything, we have discussed during this feature then please send us an email at info@soyoi.co.uk



Vinita with her family, hiking in Hong Kong